

CIA deputy chief McMahon resigns; conservative groups claim a victory

By Robert Timberg
Washington Bureau of The Sun

WASHINGTON — Conservative organizations pressing for more effective American aid to Afghan guerrillas hailed yesterday the resignation of John N. McMahon, the No. 2 man at the CIA, saying he had been a major impediment to the covert assistance program.

Two of the organizations — Free the Eagle and the Federation for American-Afghan Action — also took credit for forcing the resignation, although sources in the intelligence community, including former CIA Director Richard Helms, belittled the claims as well as reports that policy differences with the White House were a factor.

Even so, there were indications that the departure of Mr. McMahon, who was said to feel the agency was more properly employed in its classic role as an intelligence gathering organization rather than as an orchestrator of covert operations, clears the way for the more activist role favored by CIA director William J. Casey.

Mr. Helms, who spoke to Mr. McMahon yesterday morning, shortly after his resignation became public, said he was fully persuaded that Mr. McMahon's departure was precipitated by personal considerations, as he stated in his resignation letter, not matters of policy or pressure.

"It had nothing to do with the high-flying eagles or the Afghan freedom fighters," said Mr. Helms.

The White House announced Tuesday evening that Mr. McMahon, 56, the CIA's deputy director, was leaving the agency after 34 years and would be replaced by Robert M. Gates, currently deputy director for intelligence.

In his letter of resignation to President Reagan, dated Feb. 24, Mr. McMahon said he thought he had "reached a stage where I should move on," although he confessed to "mixed emotions" about leaving the agency.

In accepting the resignation "with

Organizations favoring aid to Afghan guerrillas had complained about Mr. McMahon for months.

regret," the president praised Mr. McMahon's long service to the nation, as did the senior members of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence in a joint statement.

"John's retirement will be a great loss to the CIA and to the country," said Sens. David Durenberger, R-Minn., the panel's chairman, and Patrick J. Leahy, D-Vt., the vice chairman.

If confirmed by the Senate, Mr. Gates, 42, a 20-year veteran of the agency and a specialist on Soviet and Eastern European affairs, would be the youngest man to hold the agency's second highest post. He has a reputation as a solid professional within the intelligence community.

Attempts to reach Mr. McMahon and Mr. Gates for comment were unsuccessful.

Mr. McMahon has been under heavy fire for the past six months by Free the Eagle, an organization associated with conservative activist Howard Ruff, and the American-Afghan Action federation, as well as the Heritage Foundation, a Washington think-tank with close ties to the Reagan administration.

"We kind of feel like we made a little history in holding people responsible who are not ordinarily held responsible," said John Houston, vice president of Free the Eagle, in claiming credit for precipitating Mr. McMahon's resignation.

Mr. Houston said his organization had flooded White House chief of staff Donald T. Regan with more than 10,000 letters urging Mr.

McMahon's dismissal. A senior White House official, however, speaking on the condition he not be identified, said no more than 1,000 of the form letters were received.

Andrew L. Elva, executive director of American-Afghan Action, said his organization also played a key role in Mr. McMahon's departure and, along with Mr. Houston, argued that Mr. McMahon had personally tried to undercut the U.S. policy of providing the guerrillas with "effective assistance."

Mr. Elva also said that in January 1980, a few weeks after the Soviet Union's December 1979 invasion of Afghanistan, Mr. McMahon argued in an internal Carter administration memorandum that the United States should not get involved in aiding the fledgling Afghan guerrilla movement. Mr. Elva said he learned of the memo recently from a "high administration source" he refused to identify.

Overruled on the Afghan issue, Mr. Elva said, Mr. McMahon subsequently administered the covert operation in a way that condemned the rebels "to a slow death."

In particular, according to the Heritage Foundation's James T. Hackett, Mr. McMahon insisted on providing the guerrillas with captured Soviet and Chinese weapons rather than more sophisticated and effective American or Western European arms so that the agency could "plausibly deny" it was involved in a secret aid program.

George A. Carver Jr., a former senior CIA official, said such obvious subterfuge was not foolish. "Even if you're doing something everybody knows you're doing, you don't want to rub their noses in it so they have to do something officially about it," he said.

But Mr. Hackett said the U.S. assistance program to the Afghan resistance can be effective only if the rebels are provided with the weapons necessary to combat Soviet forces, especially helicopter gunships.

2 Senators Promise to Insist on Truth From C.I.A.

By STEPHEN ENGELBERG

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, March 5 — Two members of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence said today that they would insist that the man nominated to be the new Deputy Director of the Central Intelligence Agency tell the panel when it has been misled by any agency official, including the Director.

John N. McMahon, who resigned Tuesday as Deputy Director, agreed to the same arrangement nearly four years ago at his confirmation hearing. He said he would feel a personal and professional responsibility to "correct the record," regardless of who had tes-

tified inaccurately before Congress. The promise came in response to questioning by members of the committee.

Today, Senator Patrick J. Leahy, Democrat of Vermont, vice chairman of the intelligence committee, and Senator William S. Cohen, Republican of Maine, a committee member, said they would ask Robert M. Gates, named as Mr. McMahon's replacement, to provide the same assurances.

The White House said Tuesday that Mr. McMahon would resign effective March 29 for "personal reasons" and it said President Reagan planned to nominate Mr. Gates, who is now the agency's director for intelligence. In this job he supervises the agency's analysts, who interpret intelligence information.

The Senate and House intelligence committees oversee the C.I.A.'s activities and they depend largely on classified briefings by the agency. In the tenure of William J. Casey as Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, there have been several instances in which members of the committee felt that Mr. Casey or other agency officials had been incomplete or misleading in their presentations.

Senator Cohen said: "John McMahon has enjoyed the reputation that when he is called upon to testify he is very straight with the committee. I

believe Mr. Gates is of the same caliber and to the extent that he is now part of operations, we would expect the same thing and I think we'll get it. We can't do our jobs if we're not getting accurate information."

The Senate confirmation hearing for Mr. Gates has not yet been scheduled. Mr. Cohen predicted that Mr. Gates would easily win Senate approval, calling him "highly thought of." The hearing will be the committee's first public session since December of 1983.

Senator Cohen said the hearing would be an opportunity to explore the nominee's views on covert operations, the role of Congressional oversight and the future direction of the agency.

The issue of covert operations has proved a sensitive one in the Reagan Administration. Under Mr. Casey, the agency has expanded its role in major

covert efforts to support insurgencies in Nicaragua, Angola and Afghanistan. Administration officials say that Mr. McMahon sometimes expressed doubts about these efforts when the plans were being formulated. They said, however, that he was a "team player" once a decision was reached.

These officials said there was no evidence that Mr. McMahon's resignation came as a result of any particular policy dispute.

'Someone Was Raising Questions'

Several members of the committee said that they shared Mr. McMahon's doubts about large-scale covert actions. They said his role in questioning, and sometimes blunting, Central Intelligence Agency proposals was viewed by the committee one of his most positive contributions to the agency.

"Members of the committee felt that someone was raising questions before things got to us," said Senator Cohen. "If that is absent in the future, it may intensify the role of the committee, which would not necessarily be a good thing."

According to biographical information provided by the C.I.A., Mr. Gates joined the agency in 1966, one year after receiving his bachelor's degree from the College of William & Mary. He earned a doctorate in Russian and Soviet History from Georgetown University in 1974. He began working for the National Security Council Staff the same year, and he remained to serve Presidents Ford and Carter before returning to the C.I.A. in 1979. In 1982, he assumed his job as director for intelligence.

Reagan replaces official in CIA

WASHINGTON [AP]—President Reagan has named career intelligence officer Robert M. Gates to replace Deputy CIA Director John N. McMahon, who reportedly opposed increased aid to paramilitary movements in Third World countries.

McMahon's resignation, announced late Tuesday, was hailed by two conservative lobbying groups that had called for his removal, claiming he had hampered Afghan rebels' efforts to overthrow the Soviet-installed government in Kabul.

McMahon, 56, a 34-year veteran of intelligence work, gave no explanation for his resignation other than to say in a letter to Reagan he had "reached a stage where I should move on."

The White House statement cited "personal reasons" for the deputy's departure, which is to be effective March 29.

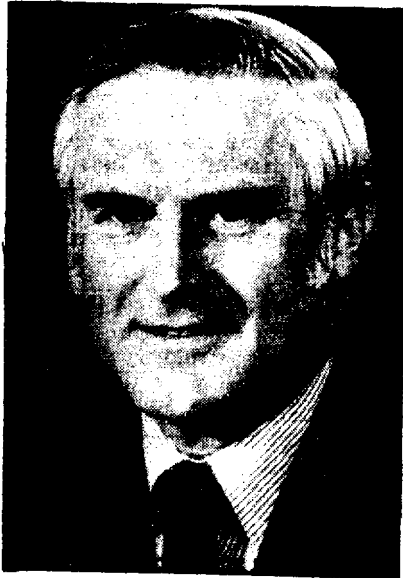
But the Washington Post, quoting unidentified administration sources, said McMahon has opposed the Reagan administration's expansion of covert operations in Third World conflicts and decided to leave after an interagency group decided to escalate four paramilitary operations.

The Post's sources would not specify the countries involved but indicated that they were mentioned in recent administration statements. Those countries are Afghanistan, Nicaragua, Angola and Cambodia, the Post said.

McMahon was against increased U.S. involvement in Third World conflicts that he believed could not win long-term political support at home, the newspaper said. It described him as the agency's conscience.

There was no immediate explanation for the White House announcement Tuesday night, coming as it did after office hours and after reporters had been told there would be no further statements from the White House.

"It's a great breakthrough," said Andrew Eiva of the Federation for American-Afghan Action. Free the Eagle, another group, mounted a



John N. McMahon

direct-mail campaign against McMahon that generated 10,000 letters to White House Chief of Staff Donald Regan, said John Houston, the group's vice president.

Among other things, the groups blamed McMahon for holding up supplies of more effective weapons, including anti-aircraft missiles, to the Afghan rebels.

Gates, the Central Intelligence Agency's deputy director for intelligence and a specialist in Soviet and Eastern European affairs, has served two tours on the National Security Council staff as its intelligence chief.

Gates, 42, holds a doctoral degree from Georgetown University and has been associated with the CIA for 20 years, serving most of that time at the agency's headquarters in Langley, Va., just outside Washington.

In a letter dated Feb. 24 but not released until the resignation was announced, McMahon told Reagan, "With over 34 years in intelligence, I have reached a stage where I should move on."

McMahon offered praise for CIA Director William Casey, a former

Reagan campaign chairman who had not been associated with the intelligence community since World War II and has encountered some opposition within the CIA and on Capitol Hill since assuming the directorship five years ago.

He called Casey "a unique asset," who has brought wisdom, energy and leadership "that has provided our country with an intelligence capability second to none."

McMahon was nominated by Reagan to be deputy director on April 26, 1982, after Adm. Bobby Inman resigned. By most accounts, McMahon won the respect of the House and Senate oversight committees during his tenure in the No. 2 post, while Casey had an up-and-down relationship with Congress.

Before the promotion, McMahon had held the agency's No. 3 post—executive director. During his lifelong career at the agency, McMahon had helped run the U-2 spy plane program and later managed the agency's spy network.